

Our Teeth and Lungs are Lined with the Scum of It

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Our Teeth and Lungs are Lined with the Scum of It

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Summary

Alina stared, desperately trying to make sense of what she was seeing. Flowers? How could she have coughed up flowers? It didn't make any sense! She startled as the doors to the dormitory opened, one of the girls had gone and fetched Ana Kuya. Alina closed the flowers in her fist, shoving them under her pillow.

Alina develops chronic hanahaki disease as a consequence of her unrequited loves. She's already sick all the time, why not add coughing up flowers into the mix?

Tags will update with the story, will include both Mal/Alina and Darkling/Alina.

Notes

This was meant to be a cute little oneshot, but it absolutely got away from us, so this is gonna be a multi-chapter fic. We will try to update every other day, but no promises!

Chapter 1

It all started the day the Grisha examiners left Keramzin. As she laid in bed that night, Alina felt a hollow, creeping feeling bloom deep in her chest. That was the last good night of sleep she had in a while.

Alina awoke the next morning in a coughing fit. She coughed for what felt like ages, doubled over on her hands and knees. Her throat burned and her chest felt like it would cave in every time she coughed. She was vaguely aware of someone talking to her and rubbing her back, but she couldn't hear them over the blood roaring in her ears. Oh saints, she was going to vomit if she kept coughing.

"Try and take deep breaths, child. If you keep coughing like this, you'll be sick." Alina tried to breathe deeply, but every time she tried to inhale, her breath caught at the back of her throat, throwing her back into a coughing fit. Each inhale produced a high-pitched, whistling sound, each cough sounding almost like a bark. Eventually, Alina sucked in a breath as deeply as she could and held it - her chest continued to spasm, trying to force everything out. She clamped her hand over her mouth and nose, willing the episode to pass. Slowly, her chest stopped shaking, her heart rate slowing down. She released her hand, her head dropping to the bed. Her breathing was still shaky, but the coughing had passed.

"There we go. No more of that now, thank you." Alina pushed herself up to a seated position, gratefully accepting the glass of water Ana Kuya pressed into her hands. The lukewarm water soothed the burning in her throat and she drank much too fast, slightly choking.

"Careful, now, or else you'll make yourself start coughing all over again." She slowed down slightly, but still drained the glass in moments. She handed the glass back to Ana Kuya and cleared her throat.

"Thank you, Ma'am." Ana Kuya nodded and placed her wrist on Alina's forehead, checking her temperature.

"Well, you don't have a fever. Still, it's best you stay in bed for the day. Don't want you making yourself worse off, now do we?" Alina shook her head. As much as she didn't want to be stuck in bed all day, the thought of another coughing fit sounded worse. That and whatever punishment Ana Kuya would dole out for making herself ill. "Good. I'll have one of the other girls bring up your journal and some pencils. No point in lazing around when you can be practicing your sketching. Practice makes perfect, and perfect is what'll keep you out of the fighting corps."

Alina stayed silent as Ana Kuya left, taking another deep breath to center herself. The creeping feeling wasn't gone, but it had abated some, enough for her to rest.

One of the other girls, Anya, brought Alina's drawing supplies up a few minutes later, leaving Alina alone in the girls' dormitory. She started by copying the scraps of maps and drawings she had stuck in her journal, but quickly ran out. She moved on to drawing the dormitory, sketching out the rows of beds and bedside tables, trying to capture the way the motes of dust

swirled in the sunlight. Eventually, she grew bored with realism and started daydreaming, sketching little creatures in the margins of her other drawings. She flipped to a fresh page in her journal and started sketching creatures from her favorite story - Morozova's creatures. She loved the stories of the Firebird, Sea Whip, and Stag. She'd already drawn the Stag, but she hadn't drawn the others.

She was halfway through drawing the Sea Whip, trying to capture the way the sun glinted off of the waves and scales, when she heard footsteps coming towards the dormitory doors. She quickly shuffled through her journal, finding a page that had a copy of the map of Kribirsk. Ana Kuya prefers that she spend her time on maps and landscapes rather than creatures of fantasy. She bent over and began to add tiny little shading marks in random spots, trying to look busy. She only looked up when the door creaked open, expecting to see Ana Kuya coming to check on her. Instead, a dark-haired head poked its way through the gap, scanning the room. Alina perked up almost immediately.

"Mal?"

"Is the coast clear?"

"Yeah, I'm the only one up here." Mal burst through the doors, stopping only long enough to shut the door behind him before practically throwing himself onto Alina's bed. Alina giggled as she rescued her journal from being crushed underneath him.

"Careful! Don't let Ana Kuya catch you up here, she'll put you on kitchen duty for a month!" Mal groaned.

"Ugh, I just got off kitchen duty last week!"

"Exactly! That's why you can't get caught up here!" Mal laughed and nudged her,

"Well, I didn't want to leave you up here alone all day. They can't keep us apart for long."

They spent the day laughing and making up stories and games, making the hours fly by. When they heard fast, measured footsteps approaching the dormitory doors, Alina shoved Mal off the bed.

"She's coming, you have to hide!" Mal darted towards the doors before realizing that he couldn't make it out of the door without Ana Kuya spotting him. He panicked for a moment and froze right in front of the doors. Alina whispered to him as loudly as she dared,

"Quick! Hide! Under the bed, she won't see you there!" Mal managed to dive under the bed just as Ana Kuya entered the door. Alina breathed out a sigh of relief.

"You're looking much better. Have you been working on your sketches?"

"Yes, Ma'am. I've been working on-" Alina cut herself off when she realized her journal was open to her drawing of the Sea Whip and not her cartography sketches. Ana Kuya picked up her journal before Alina could flip away.

“Drawing of myths and fantasy won’t keep you out of the corps, girl. I thought I told you to work on your maps.”

“I’m sorry, Ana Kuya. I was working on them, but -” Alina cut herself off as she caught movement out of the corner of her eye. Mal had moved out from under the bed and was creeping towards the open door. “But I ran out of maps to copy. I can show you what I’ve finished?” Alina watched as Mal silently slipped out the door, waving to her as he went. She caught herself smiling for a second before remembering that she was being scolded.

Ana Kuya lectured her for a few moments, reminding her that she needed to work on her sketches to stay out of the fighting corps. Otherwise, she wouldn’t live long enough to see twenty. As Ana Kuya left her once again, Alina realized that the creeping feeling in her chest was gone. In fact, it had left as soon as Mal walked through the door.

~ ~ ~

The coughing stayed with her through the winter and into the beginning of spring. Alina chalked it up to a mid-winter chest cold. When the cough returned at the turn of the year she decided she was cursed. This time, when she awoke with a coughing fit, it was worse. It was the same creeping, chest-crushing, vomit-inducing cough, but this time she could feel herself coughing something *up*. She could feel *something* climbing it’s way up her throat, something small and sticky. She covered her mouth with her hands as if that would keep whatever it was done.

Eventually, Alina felt whatever it was work it’s way up her throat and out into her hands. Soon after, the coughing subsided and she found herself desperately gasping for air. She slowly opened her hand, scared to see what was there. In her palm, she found three tiny white flowers, speckled with blood.

Alina stared, desperately trying to make sense of what she was seeing. Flowers? How could she have coughed up *flowers*? It didn’t make any sense! She startled as the doors to the dormitory opened, one of the girls had gone and fetched Ana Kuya. Alina closed the flowers in her fist, shoving them under her pillow.

“Well, you look fine to me. A bit pale, maybe, but no worse for the wear. Are you sick, girl?” Aline shook her head.

“No, Ana Kuya. I had a bit of a cough, but I feel fine.” Ana Kuya gave her a skeptical look.

“All right, then. If you start to feel ill, you go straight up to bed, you hear me?”

“Yes, Ma’am.” Ana Kuya nodded, giving her one last look before leaving. Alina slipped her hand out from under her pillow and opened her hands. The flowers, now a bit crushed, were still there. Alina didn’t know what was going on, but she did know one thing. No one else could find out about this.

Chapter 2

Chapter Notes

Chapter one has been updated! Somehow I forgot to include a whole chunk of the chapter, so please go back and see what you missed!

Every year the cough came back. The first month of the year she'd wake in a fit, coughing up more of those damn flowers - snowdrops - and every spring, they'd disappear as quickly as they came. Every year the cough would get worse. Within two years she found it impossible to hide - how could she when something as simple as dust or a cold day triggered a fit? She managed to hide the flowers, quickly stuffing them into her pockets before anyone could see. Some days she would find herself with dozens of the blooms hidden away in her skirts.

Alina counted herself lucky, she was ill so often that no one thought twice about her cough returning each year. Most just attributed it to the cold wreaking havoc on her weak lungs or some form of seasonal allergies. Mal, however, wasn't as easily fooled. Whenever she would double over in a fit or stay confined to her bed for the day, he would be practically inseparable from her, Ana Kuya's punishments be damned. He'd bring her little treats, glasses of water. Once, when she was particularly ill and bedbound, he hauled over what seemed like half of his bedding to keep her warm and comfortable.

It was nice, in a way, no matter how stressful it was trying to hide the flowers right under his nose. She found that when she was with Mal, when she wasn't consumed with anxiety that he would find out about the flowers, the creeping feeling in her chest went away, if only for a few moments.

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Alina coughed into her handkerchief, trying to hide the two wilted flowers she'd just coughed up. While her cough had begun to disappear again, the bumpy carriage ride was churning up whatever was left in her lungs.

"Are you okay, Alina?" She stuffed her handkerchief back into her jacket pocket and glanced at Alexi.

"I'm alright, thank you though." She picked up her pencil and went back to her drawing of the Fold. Alexi leaned over and watched her work.

"Alina, how can you do that in here?"

"Bumps help with texture." Alexi huffed out a laugh and went to reply before the boy across from her spoke.

“The Fold looks different on mine. I need to get a better view from your country.” Before she could reply, Alexi shoved the boy back.

“She grew up here. Come on!”

“The Shu Han didn’t want her either.” Alina felt her blood turn to ice water, and looked up to glare at him.

“Cartographers, listen up! We’re almost there. Pack up and be ready to leave. And if you lose anything, you will not be getting a replacement.” The rest of the ride into camp was quiet, everyone too busy gathering their supplies to fight. Suddenly, the sound of the Fold stopped everyone in their tracks. It almost sounded like growling, as if you could already hear the monsters inside of it.

When they exited the carriage they all stopped to stare at the Fold. They’d all seen it on a map hundreds of times, but it was a different thing entirely to see it in person. It was huge, towering over the surrounding landscape, extending as far as the eye could see. The surface rippled, lightning breaking it’s surface every so often like a thunderstorm. Alexi broke the silence,

“We are never going to see it go away. This abomination is here forever.” Raisa came up from behind, smirking at him.

“You don’t go to church. A saint who will summon the sun will destroy it.”

“I’d like to see even one person who isn’t scared of that.”

“I bet I know someone. Mal. He isn’t afraid of anything.” Alina huffed out a laugh at that.

“You’d be surprised.” With that, Alina made her way into camp, searching for the cartographer’s tent. She looked at the state of the camp as she walked through. It had definitely seen better days. She had just crossed the small bridge when someone called her name.

“Alina!” She turned and smiled as she spotted Mal, throwing his coat on as he walked towards her.

“When did you get in?”

“Yesterday. Everyone’s getting their assignments.” He threw his arm around her shoulder and started leading her through camp. She had to keep herself from burrowing into his side.

“Suppose cartography’s heading back south?”

“Yeah! I found out ‘cause they’re putting my unit with yours again. They’re looking for a way through the mountains.” Alina smiled up at him.

“Oh! So we’re back together?”

“They can’t keep best friends apart for too long!”

~ ~ ~

That night Aline felt better than she had in months. Well, physically better. Her cough had completely disappeared, soothed by Mal's presence like it always was. Emotionally, however? She was a mess. She was finally reunited with Mal after months apart, and now he has to cross the Fold? There was no guaranteeing he'd make it through once, let alone through and back again! She had to go with him, had to find a way on that skiff.

Alina found her ticket on board in the cartography tent. The one nice thing about paper maps is that paper is easily damaged. One stray candle can do quite a bit of damage. She gathered up all of the maps of Os Kervo and the surrounding area - maps of the other side of the Fold which would be hard to replace. She threw them all in a waste bin and lit an edge with one of the candles. Once it began to burn, she raced out and waited for someone to find it.

It didn't take long for someone to notice and put the fire out, but by then enough damage was done. Lieutenant Bohdan found Petya trying to save what she could.

"Petya! How did this happen?"

"We don't know. We were extra careful to secure all the lanterns."

"And what was damaged?"

"Nothing major. Just some records of the Western coastline, Os Kervo and the river system that runs through it. It's really not -"

"Critical? Geographical data of the territory on the other side of the damn Fold? Those records?"

"Yes, but I'm sure that the First Army on the other side has an-"

"You think I trust anyone else's intel? Now someone will have to cross the Fold to redraw these maps." Alina stepped away from her hiding place outside and into the tent.

"I'll go. Put me on the skiff, I'll go." Lieutenant Bohdan turned to her, fire in his eyes.

"Yes. You will. Your whole unit will."

~ ~ ~

"I don't understand. We were going South, now we're going West?" Alexi asked. Raisa came up behind them, practically fuming.

"What did you do?" She asked, directed at Alina.

"Nothing!" Alexi, ever her defender, replied as well.

"Leave her alone, Raisa. You want everything to be her fault."

“I’m usually right!” Alina continued with the rest of the cartographers towards the skiff. As she was boarding, Mal spotted her. He grabbed her arm, trying to steer her off the skiff.

“What the hell are you doing here?”

“We’ve been assigned with you.”

“No. Turn around right now.”

“Orders are orders.”

“I could shoot you in the foot?” Alina made to push past him.

“I like my feet, thank you.” Mal grabbed her wrist again.

“Tell them you’re too sick to go, you’re always sick this time of year.”

“I’m never that sick!”

“Lie if you have to!”

“And what’s your lie? I’m with you.”

“Get off this boat now, or I’ll carry you off.” Suddenly, another crewman shouted, startling them out of their conversation.

“Raise the gate! Ready to lock up!” The gate snapped shut, locking them in. Alina looked at Mal, determined.

“I’ll make it. Promise.”

Chapter 3

Alina felt dazed as she was brought to General Kirigan's tent, the soldiers on either side of her painfully squeezing her arms. They walked through a line of Grisha soldiers, all of them staring at Alina. She couldn't tell if they were angry or shocked or confused, but she didn't think it mattered. Whatever happened, she was in trouble.

She blinked hard as she was led into the tent. The black fabric kept the tent dim and her eyes struggled to adjust. The man standing at the head table, presumably General Kirigan, spoke without turning to look at her.

"Bring her closer." The guards pushed her a few steps further, letting go of her arms. General Kirigan turned.

"Closer." Alina took a hesitant step forward.

"Well?"

"Well, what? Sir."

"What are you?"

"Alina Starkov, Assistant Cartographer, Royal Corps of Surveyors." Alina thought for a moment. "They're all gone. It's my fault. That's why I'm here, isn't it?"

"Answer the question. What are you?"

"A mapmaker, sir." All of the Grisha in the tent laughed as if she had told a joke.

"Quiet. So, who actually saw what happened? Zoya? You manned the main sail." The beautiful Grisha in blue stepped forward.

"We were attacked barely two markers in. Someone lit a lantern."

"And?"

"The volcra went after the riflemen and our Inferni first. And then there was a searing light." A First Army soldier stepped forward, as well.

"It was her!" General Kirigan turned to her again.

"Our mapmaker. Is this true? Can you summon light?" Alina shook her head, confused and concerned. "Where did you grow up?"

"Keramzin."

"Hmm. And when were you tested?" Alina hesitated. "You don't remember? Well, let us just make certain." He walked towards her, moving his ring to his thumb. "Lift up your sleeve."

“What’s happening?” Darkness had begun to creep into the tent, blocking out more of the sun.

“Your sleeve. Please.” Alina warily pushed her sleeve up to her elbow. General Kirigan gripped her arm by the wrist and pushed her sleeve up as far as it would go. He scraped his ring along the soft flesh of her upper arm, cutting open her skin. Alina watched, horrified and confused, as light began to pour forth from her wound, flooding the tent in gold. General Kirigan watched her, a pleased smile forming on his face.

After a moment he dropped her arm, the golden light disappearing with his hand. Alina stumbled backwards, staring at her arm. What had she gotten herself into now?

~ ~ ~

Alina was, once again, escorted by armed guards - this time to a black carriage manned with two men in red keftas. One of the men opened the carriage doors and motioned for her to get in.

“Let’s go. Get in.” Alina hesitated.

“No. There’s been a mistake, I need to find Mal.”

“The general does not make mistakes. His orders were to get you to the Little Palace immediately. Now get in the coach.”

“Look at me. Do I look important to you?” The man in red smirked.

“You look like trouble. Which is nearly the same. Move.” He moved towards her, probably planning on forcing her into the coach.

“Wait! Malyen Oretsev. He’s in the medic tent. I need to speak with him. I’m going to speak with him.” Alina tried to leave, but the man grabbed her by the arm.

“Listen to me. Every spy in the area will hear what you did and our enemies will come for you. Our only chance is to get you to Os Alta, behind palace walls, before you get killed. Come on.” This time he physically dragged her to the coach, forcing her in. As soon as the doors closed, the coach began to move. She looked out the window as they made their way through camp, spotting Mal as they went past the medic tent.

“Mal!” She started pounding on the windows, trying to get the coach to stop.

“Alina! No!” Mal jumped up and ran after the coach, calling for her.

“No! No, stop! I didn’t know!”

“Alina!”

“I didn’t know!”

“Alina!”

“Mal!” The coach began to move faster, much faster than Mal could run after her. Alina stared through the window, watching as Mal’s form faded into the distance. As he disappeared, she felt the all too familiar creeping feeling return to her chest. Before she could think she was hit with another coughing fit.

Alina coughed into her fist, desperately trying to hide the blood-soaked flowers she was coughing up. One of the men, not the one who forced her into the carriage, held out a handkerchief. She took it, doubling over as the coughing grew more violent. She needed to get this under control, she didn’t need more questions right now. She held her breath, body shaking as her chest continued to convulse. As the shaking slowed down she was able to take in a deep breath, feeling her chest rattle with the force of it. After a few deep breaths she felt well enough to speak. She straightened up and stuffed the now bloodstained handkerchief into the pocket of the red coat they gave her. She then turned to the man who gave her the handkerchief.

“Thank you.” He smiled and nodded at her.

“This is Fedyor.”

“Pleasure to meet you.” Alina smiled and started to fiddle with her coat, unsure of how to navigate this situation. Fedyor noticed her unease. “They call this a kefta. It’s bulletproof. The uniform of the Second Army.” Alina traced the scar on her left palm.

“What about the First Army? Back in Kribirsk? A thousand soldiers marching with us. Isn’t that safer?” The other man spoke.

“Slower, not safer. Not really.”

“If you left me with the cartography unit, no one would look twice at us.” Fedyor gave her an odd look.

“And why is that? You summon pure sunlight. Your type of Etherealki has just been a theory, a picture in a storybook. Until now. You’re a very special girl, so how has no one looked twice at you before?”

“Are you joking? Maybe it’s nicer inside the Little Palace, but out here, when you’re different, when you look different, everything’s at risk of becoming a fight.” Once again, the other man interjected.

“Do you know why the Little Palace has walls in the first place? Hmm? Because for years, being Grisha was a death sentence. At least now, thanks to General Kirigan, we’re protected. Feared. And that’s how we survive. Not by being overlooked, but by making them look, and knowing you’re powerful.”

“I’ve survived long enough without your protection. Thank you.” Fedyor looked at her once again.

“But you wouldn’t last a minute now that you are you. All of Ravka has been waiting for you.” Alina cleared her throat, trying to suppress another round of coughing.

“I get it. The whole country wants to see the Fold gone.”

“But it’s bigger than that. You are hope for the country, yes, but a myth come true for a Grisha. It was a Grisha who created the Fold. If a Grisha destroys it, maybe... maybe we wouldn’t need those high walls to protect us anymore.”

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